Ecological Background and Archaeological Evidences in Vilpattu National Park

By

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Abstracts

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The Vilpattu National Park (VNP) is the oldest and largest national park in the country situated in the arid zone in the north-western corner of the Island.

The VNP comprise with a large number of natural habitats representing three major ecosystems such as forests, wetlands, and coastal ecosystems. Total number of 623 flowering plants, 292 vertebrates, and 86 invertebrate have been recorded from the VNP.

VNP is not only significant from an ecological standpoint but it is also extremely rich in archaeological terms housing a number of monuments which belongs to Prehistoric to colonial periods. Its high diversified ecosystems and landscape has facilitated to find food, shelter, and materials for tools to the prehistoric man. Total numbers of 13 prehistoric sites were identified all over the park. Total of 46 sites belonged to protohistoric and historic periods. These sites were distributed in association with water bodies, riverine habitats, flood plains, and where the soil and landscape favor agriculture. Due to water scarcity in the area, the natural villu habitats have been converted to tanks and water has been diverted for paddy cultivations. This may be the first experience of tank building history in the country. In addition, 28 irrigation structures were also identified during the survey.

The present findings also support to clearly identify the ancient *Uruvela* ports location as the present *Kollankanatta* area. The possible ancient road net work within the VNP as well as ancient marine activities and internal and external trade were also discussed. The identity of the ancient settlers and their relationship with monuments (inscriptions, and burials) and legends were also discussed in the present study.

The recent findings also support to propose a methodology to identify the ancient settlements using surrounding floral composition. Kohomba (*Azadirachta indica*), Diul (*Limonia acidissima*), and Ranavarā (*Cassia auriculata*) were the dominant floral composition found only in the ancient human settlement sites (protohistoric and historic). Forty-three out of forty six protohistoric and historic sites were surrounded by the above floral composition dominated vegetation.

However, these priceless natural and archaeological resources are facing severe pressure from various anthropogenic factors such as treasure hunting and recent, unmanaged development activities.